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Harkin & Kerry, Back in a War Zone

Two Vietnam Veterans in the Senate, Finding Parallel Lines in Nicaragua

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua — Around midnight, Sen. Tom Harkin got up from the cane-backed chair and stood on the veranda at the home of Foreign Minister Miguel D'Escoto. For a moment, the tropical breeze softened the harsh realities he and Sen. John Kerry were facing inside with Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega and D'Escoto.

Harkin (D-Iowa) and Kerry (D-Mass.)—who came here trying to extract agreements for peaceful negotiations from Ortega before today's congressional votes on "contra" aid—say the echoes of Vietnam are everywhere.

For the first time, the Senate has three Vietnam-era veterans who returned deeply opposed to that war—Kerry, Harkin and Albert Gore Jr. (D-Tenn.). Kerry got three Purple Hearts and returned to lead Vietnam Veterans Against the War, stunning the Senate Foreign Relations Committee he now serves on by asking the question, "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?" Harkin flew planes in the Vietnam theater and, as a congressional aide in 1970, exposed the infamous tiger cages where prisoners were tortured by the South Vietnamese. Now, 15 years later, they were in Nicaragua, trying to avoid what they see as another Vietnam.

"Look at it," Kerry said as their plane touched down here Thursday night. "It reminds me so much of Vietnam. The same lushness, the tree lines."

Driving into town there were more similarities: corrugated tin roof huts, the sad architecture of Third World countries—the smell of wood burning. "And the poverty."

The political parallels between Central America and Southeast Asia are not exact, they say, but both men, from dissimilar backgrounds, have come to the same place politically because of Vietnam. And they see disturbing similarities. For the first time, a U.S. president is publicly pushing Congress to fund guerrilla attacks on a country with which the United States is not at war.

"If you look back at the Gulf of Tonkin resolution," Kerry said, "if you look back at the troops that were in Cambodia, the history of the body count and the misinterpretation of the history of Vietnam itself, and look at how we are interpreting the struggle in Central America and examine the CIA involvement, the mining of the harbors, the effort to fund the contras, there is a direct and unavoidable parallel between these two periods of our history."

"Once again," said Harkin, "a president is relying on deception, distortion and duplicity to garner support for an unpopular policy, a policy not supported by the American people, for intervention in an underdeveloped country."

The land is swirling with divergent views, and the senators listened to many of them. They heard tales of repression from anti-Sandinista businessmen and politicians. They listened to Sandinista leaders who said all censorship and economic suffering would abate if only Reagan would stop funding their enemies. They talked to a pro-contra archbishop and to priests who told of contra atrocities. Many voices in a nation of fewer than 3 million.

The senators had been getting blips all day of news from Washington: Reagan, facing defeat in the House and a close call in the Senate, might seek a compromise, might ask for only "humanitarian" aid. "Seems to me Reagan has made one hell of a political mistake," said Harkin. Bumping along on the way to one meeting, Harkin caustically said: "Do you really think the CIA plans to set up soup kitchens along the Honduran border?"

Now, at midnight, Harkin rubbed his eyes and returned to the meeting that began at 6 p.m. and would last until 1:30 a.m. In the hall he noticed a frail old woman saying her rosary. Such an odd touch, thought Harkin, to the disconcerting language of war they were all speaking. She was Miguel D'Escoto's 85-year-old mother. In addition to being foreign minister, D'Escoto is a priest.

What Ortega Said

In Managua itself, there is the look of war, but it is deceptive—merely the cracked and crumbled ruins that remain unrestored from the 1972 earthquake. On Friday, earthquake tremors rattled keys hanging on the wall at the U.S. Embassy. The quake registered 6.5 on the Richter scale.

The city is about four hours by car from the war zone, close to the Honduran border. Sitting in the Intercontinental Hotel, listening to a Muzak version of "I Just Called to Say I Love You," reminds some of the Hotel Caravelle in Saigon, where

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